

Anne Timpson (#370)

At one point, she confuses Edith Berkman, who was not deported, with Eulalia Figueiredo, who accepted voluntary departure to Poland in the 1950s rather than risk deportation to Salazar's Portugal.

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Interviewer: Mary Armitage Realistic Tape Recorder

003 Intro: March 17, 1996, Sunday - at Heritage State Park, corner of Jackson and Canal Streets in Lawrence, MA. Interviewer, Mary Armitage. Narrator, Anne Burlak Timpson. Hartley Pleshaw is present, also, as a courtesy. I was told I'd have one half hour with Mrs. Timpson. Hartley asked if he could sit in and take notes.

005 Interviewer asks Narrator to describe a day in the life of a labor organizer particularly in relation to contact with the place that needs them. Who notifies the organizer, etc.

011 Mrs. Timpson tells that she was originally a textile worker though most men worked in steel. She came from Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. She wanted to be a school teacher. That became impossible - she went to work in the mills in c. 1925. She worked 52 hours a week - Her wages were \$9.00 per week. Later she became a weaver, did piece work and earned more. She eventually became a skilled weaver. Strikes were breaking out.

063 Reference to woolen and worsted - the difficulty of handling the looms - cotton was easier because it was lighter.

071 Narrator asks time frame in narrative. Mrs. Timpson was 14 years when she started to work. Strikes start in 1927. Textile industry was unorganized. References to her father striking in steel industry in 1919. She refers to Wm. D. Foster who organized a new independent union involving a number of industries in the early 1930s. He was the leader of the 1919 steel strike. A national steel strike.

080 Many strikes in this period were spontaneous strikes. Workers who were on strike would march to other mills in the area and call on the workers to come out and join them and many did.

109 She explains what a "national strike" is.

115 New England was mostly a textile area with some shoe factories. In 1934 there was a national textile strike. New England was very much involved in the South - began building mills there.

121 Her first visit to Boston was in 1930. Not as an organizer but to tell about her experiences in the South because the South was completely unorganized. She was associated with the National Textile Workers Union.

129 She explains why she was associated with that union. AFL was not interested in low paid workers because they couldn't get high dues from the workers. When she first worked in mills she was fired five times for speaking out for workers rights. She was interested in promoting decent working conditions.

151 Narrator asks at what point in her life was she recognized as being good at what she did (organizing). She was once interested in general unionization. In 1929 she went from New England to Cleveland, Ohio to the founding convention of the Trade Union Unity League, a conglomerate of unions. In late 20s and early 30s these independent unions were being organized because the AFL was not going into low paid industries. The AFL didn't go into the South until after "we" were there. They didn't want to lose out on organizing the vast numbers of textile workers.

188 She describes the development of mills and accompanying villages in the South. She interprets it as control by management. These were cotton mills. The woolen and worsted mills were in Lawrence and Lowell.

193 She refers to the mills she worked in in Bethlehem in 1925 as silk mills. She worked mostly on two looms - and gradually worked up to four looms.

202 Her father was a union man. Her family was Ukrainian - a plundered and divided up country - Her mother lived in the part that was Austria/Hungary. She came from a peasant family who believed that boys needed an education but girls didn't. Her mother was illiterate - she taught her mother to read and write when she (Anne) was fourteen.

222 In the 30s Anne Burlak Tompson was starting to learn to be an organizer.

228 Reference by interviewer to presence of Edith Berkman at first strike in 1931 in Lawrence in February. Interviewer asks, "how did it all happen" (the involvement of Anne Burlack Tompson in Lawrence strike of 1931.)

231 She was a member of the National Textile Workers Union. She refers to not being able to talk about the union in the mills. There was no law that said they had a right to talk about it - join it- be active in it.

244 Hartley Pleshaw asks if she was fired in Bethlehem because of her being a member of the NTWU - She explains. Workers were dissatisfied with craft unions. They felt that craft unions could not represent all workers. Their union was formed because they didn't agree with the leadership of the craft unions.

274 She clarifies various unions mentioned in news clips at the time of the 1931 strike.

281 Edith Berkman was Lawrence organizer. She (Anne Burlak Timpson) is asked by interviewer how she was notified to come to Lawrence. She describes kinds of mills and their location but doesn't answer the question.

320 Narrator refers to mills going South. Narrator explains that it is because there was no organization here until her union came. Only 5% of textile mills were organized.

338 Narrator is asked how many people came with her to Lawrence in 1931. She came alone. Edith Berkman was assigned to the Lawrence- Lowell area. They had another organizer in the New Bedford-Fall River area. And another in Taunton. She was preferred in textile areas because she had worked in textiles. She describes some of the difficulties in working in weaving. A problem couldn't be corrected without stopping the machine. You had to know what you were doing. You wanted to avoid having flawed material.

END IF SIDE I OF TAPE #370

SIDE II OF TAPE #370

003 Interviewer refers to strikes of 1931 not being won by strikers. Narrator says that they (the workers) didn't get what they wanted in February and that is why they struck again. (note: the first strike was because of objection to a procedure; the second strike was in objection to a 10% decrease in wages)

009 Narrator refers to coming to Lawrence to replace Edith Berkman.

013 Interviewer asks whether the workers that struck returned to work with a 5 or a 10% decrease in pay.

015 She says it was the 5% reduction.

017 She refers to AFL talking to management and making compromises without consulting with the workers. She compares the North and South textile industries. She explains that some members of boards of directors served on the boards of both Northern and Southern mills.

030 Interviewer asks if depression was an influence in these strikes. She refers to Congressmen and governors owning mills and that put workers at a disadvantage.

041 Interviewer asks about unionization of Stevens Mills. They struck in 1931. Narrator does not think it was unionized but struck in sympathy.

052 Narrator is asked who was the "Red Flame," she or Edith Berkman. Edith Berkman was the original "Red Flame." A Lawrence newspaper transfers the title to Anne Berlak Timpson.

065 The arrest of Edith Berkman was a Federal arrest. She was not deported but there is a law regarding "voluntary departure." She was Portuguese - Portuguese was a Fascist country at that time - they fought against her being deported to Portugal because it meant she would be put in a concentration camp or executed. She was a Communist and so is Mrs. Timpson.

081 Interviewer notes that friction arose in Lawrence when Communists joined in strike activity that didn't exist during other strikes. Mrs. Timpson refers to viciousness of AFL - references to "foreigners" meaning foreign born agitators - her union preferred agitators to be workers with experience who were native born.

103 Interviewer refers to thoughts of Governor Ely who served in 1931 and was influential in the Strike. He thought that the worker was not adequately represented. The narrator is asked if it would have been less difficult to represent the workers if she had been a Democrat or a Republican and not a Communist. She replies that Democrats and Republicans avoid battles. Employers took advantage of schism between the unions because they wanted union among the workers for their advantage - they tried to educate the workers that employers will use any tactic that will break the unions - ethnic frictions, etc.

128 There follows interesting observations about workers and their differences; The favoritism of management for English speaking workers.

154 Narrator is asked about participation of Elizabeth Gurley Flynn in 1931 strike - she might have come to speak. She refers to her participation in the 1912 strike and the 1919 strike.

187 Hartley Pleshaw asks about her knowledge of people who were in the 1912 strike, particularly Elizabeth Gurley Flynn. She refers to her becoming a Communist in 1935 or 1936.

175 Narrator is asked what attracted her to Communism. She makes observations about the AFL and CIO and auto workers union. And TV show about militant auto workers and development of the sit down strike. When CIO drive started in 1936, within AFL - CIO adopted policies that the communists were in favor of ; militant picket lines, mass picket lines etc.

232 She refers to the Gastonia North Carolina strike of 1929. It was the first strike organized by the National Textile Workers Union. The AFL was not anxious to have the NTWU spread. Wm C. Foster was head of NTWU and was for mass action.

268 She knew Sophie Melvin, an organizer, very well. She knew John Bellum who it is mentioned was in the strike of 1912.

298 She refers to children and violence in strike of 1912.

328 Interviewer refers to child labor of the kind that resulted from falsification of birth dates because a family needed the money so badly. Anne Burlack Timpson refers to herself lying about her age because her father worked only two days a week and the family needed the money.

343 She refers to book that refers to child labor. Refers to American Woolen company soliciting workers in foreign countries in the interest of keeping workers separate.

369 She describes use of the word "socialist" in Europe - "it is not a dirty word."

392 Reference to textile workers lung disease caused by lint from cotton.

422 END OF SIDE #2 of tape # 370

SIDE #1 OF TAPE #371 (START AT 008 - THERE IS A FALSE START AT 003)

008 More on Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and children in strike of 1912 from the book "Rebel Girl."

023 She is asked if transporting children was done in other cities. She thinks so but isn't sure. Continues about brutality. Interviewer suggests that there are two sides to that story. Reference to Congressional hearings. Hartley Pleshaw refers to a video interview he has of someone who was a child at that time.

048 Narrator recommends book on Elizabeth Gurley Flynn - she says the brutality was in Lowell. Participation of important people in hearings.

087 END OF INTERVIEW.

IMMIGRANT CITY ARCHIVES
Lawrence, Massachusetts

Narrator: Anne Burlak Timpson
Interviewer: Mary Armitage
Date of Interview: March 17, 1996
Tape Number: OH 370 and 371
Transcribed by: Pamela Dallon
Ethnic Background: Ukrainian
Focus of Interview: Labor Organizer

SIDE 1

I. Today is March 17, Sunday. I am at Heritage State Park with our narrator, Anne Burlak Timpson, Hartley Pleshaw and I am Mary Armitage. I would like to ask you, Anne, if you would describe for us the day in the life of an organizer. And, first, I think if we start at the very beginning, when there is a labor problem in the city or town, who is apt to notify you and how do they go about that and explain to you that you're needed there?

N. Well it depends on how you're associated with a particular union or in any other way. I'm originally a textile worker. I grew up in the city of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania and I worked for the Bethlehem Steel Company for 20 years. In Bethlehem, most of the men worked at Bethlehem Steel. That's the major employer there and they dominated the same. And, the women worked in textiles. There were no women in the steel industry except in perhaps the offices. As a child, I was sure that I was going to become a schoolteacher. To me, a schoolteacher was a glorified individual and I was going to reach that goal. And, in the twenties, the law in Pennsylvania was that any youngster could plan to be a schoolteacher in primary schools by going to high school and then two years of what they called continuation school. Then they would be able to be graduated with good marks and become a schoolteacher in primary grades. In 1925 or thereabouts, they changed the law saying that any schoolteacher had to have a four-year college education even if it was just going to be kindergarten. And I knew that I would not be able to go through four years of college. My family could not afford it. I was the eldest of four children. I had three brothers, all younger than I. I had already worked one summer and knew that I would work my summers in the textile mills. And, that's about as far as I got. That was the first summer that I worked in the textile mill. The hours and the wages were as follows: I worked 54 hours a week – 10 hours Monday through Friday and four hours on Saturday. That makes 54 hours. And, my wages were \$9.00 a week. It was only after I would become a skilled worker as a weaver, that's actually making cloth, that my wages would change. I would be placed on piecework and then it depended on how much I produced. Because my wages would be based on

measuring how much cloth I would produce. So, I knew that I had a number of months – they said it would take two to three months to learn how to become a skilled weaver. So, I would have to work at those wages and those hours for at least three months. And, then it would depend on how fast I learned to become a skilled weaver at which time I would be put on piecework. And, then I would pretty much – how efficient I was would depend on how quickly I learned so that I would be paid on a piecework basis. I went with my three months and become what was called a skilled weaver and strikes were breaking out all over. In that period, many of the people that became regular textile workers were put on piecework. At the time, they took over a certain number of looms. And that's what happened to me. The woolen and worsted looms were the largest and the most difficult to handle because we were given only two looms to work. Now, on cotton . . . I learned this much later – in cotton, they maybe had as many as 20 looms, 40 looms.

- I. I want to establish the time frames here. What dates are we in in your working in the mill as a young girl?
- N. Well, I started working in 1925 and that would make me 14 years of age.
- I. And, when we're talking about . . . you said strikes were breaking out all over. Have we moved ahead in years here or are we still in the same timeframe?
- N. Well, not very much. We only had perhaps two years or three years.
- I. And, the reason for strikes. Is that the depression or . . . ?
- N. The textile industry was one of the unorganized industries. As a matter of fact, Bethlehem Steel was still unorganized even though there was a big steel strike in 1919. In fact, my father took part in that strike. William D. Foster, who became the leader of the new union, an independent union which was organized on a number of industries in the early 1930s, had been the leader of a big steel strike in 1918/1919 – a national steel strike. But, the workers at Bethlehem had not come out on strike at that time. And, if they were, they were not associated with any union. And, many of the strikes in that period were spontaneous strikes, which means that they weren't _____ because they were organized and the union called them out on strike. As I said, the steel industry was not organized at the time and the workers were very dissatisfied with their conditions and William D. Foster was an organizer for the American Federation of Labor at that time. He tried to get all the workers in steel to join the strike that started in Pittsburgh and other areas in that part of the country. Generally, it was a spontaneous strike because what happened was that the workers who came out on strike in the cities where it took place would march to other mills in the area and simply call on the workers to come out and join us. And, many places did because it became a national strike. Or, it was considered a national strike.
- I. In what regards? I don't understand that. Not because it was nationwide.

N. Well, it was nationwide in the sense that wherever there were steel mills. Steel mills didn't exist in every city. Pittsburgh was a steel town. Many of the towns in Ohio were steel towns. Usually, the towns that had steel mills in them . . . they take up so much territory.

I. It was national in the sense that it involved the nation's steel mills?

N. That's right. New England was mainly a textile town or a shoe town. There were shoe plants and textile mills. For instance, in 1934 there was a national textile strike and New England was very much involved and the South. Textile mills began building their mills there.

I. All right, we've touched on your early experience and now we've jumped a little bit to 1934.

N. My first visit to Boston was 1930. At that time, I did not come here as an organizer. I came here to tell about my experiences in the South because the South was completely unorganized. We realized, in the National Textile Workers Union, which is the union I was associated with . . . Why was I associated with that union, for instance?

I. Yes.

N. The AFL was not interested in taking this in because we were so low paid. My estimate of that was that we were so low paid that the union didn't expect to get dues from us. How much dues can you get from a worker that makes \$9.00 a week.

I. Excuse me, what year was this that you were organizing this textile strike?

N. Well, this is already 1931. I worked in the textile mill as a weaver and the first four years that I was working in mills, I think I was fired five times. We had no rights. There was no law anywhere in the United States that said the workers had a right to organize and strike for higher wages or better working conditions.

I. And you were fired because you spoke up?

N. That's right.

I. And, that would be your first experience then as a . . .

N. When I joined the union, I was interested in creating the kind of working conditions that would make it possible for us to live in halfway decent . . .

I. Now somewhere along the line for your career to go in the direction that it did, you must have been recognized as being good at what you did. At about what point in your life did that come?

N. Well, I remember before I was a member of the textile union that I was also interested in general unionization. And, I was one of the people that went from New England to Cleveland, as it happened, at that time in 1929 to the Founding Convention of the Trade Union Unity League, which was the overall. It was like the American Federation Labor. It was a conglomerate of unions. In the late 20s and early 30s, these independent unions were being organized because the AFL was not going in to organize the low paid industries. The AFL didn't go into the South until after we were there. And, they didn't want to lose out on organizing the fast numbers of textile workers. The difference, for instance, was that in the South as they built new mills, they would build company villages. In other words, when they build a particular plant, they also build a village around it because they wanted to control the lives of the workers. They wanted them to live in company houses and do their shopping for both groceries and clothing and so forth in company stores. So, they didn't use the city police. Let's say I lived in Greenville for awhile – Greenville, South Carolina, which is in the very heart of what is called the Piedmont Region. Piedmont Region is a conglomerate of textile mills. It would be the place from which to start organizing if you were to organize the mill. The cotton mills were there. In Lawrence, you see, they were woolen and worsted. In Pennsylvania, you had quite a number of silk mills. Some silk mills were also in New England. And then you'd have the Lawrence and Lowell that were woolen and worsted.

I. You started working in the textile mills in Bethlehem in 1925?

N. Silk.

I. Silk, excuse me, in 1925.

N. Well, I only identified the kind of mills I worked in. And, in the silk industry, you also didn't . . . only in cotton did you have this large number of weaves per person. In some places as many as 30 some odd looms. In both silk and in woolen, you started out on maybe two looms. I worked most of the time two looms and after several years I was on four looms.

I. So, in 1925 you started working in the mills in Bethlehem. Was that when you first got involved with union activity?

N. Yes. You see, my father was interested in unions. I come from a Ukrainian family. Ukraine has always been plundered and divided up by the . . . I guess the earliest ones were the Scandinavians that organized the workers or tried to organize the workers. But, in the Ukraine, my mother lived in that part of the Ukraine which was part of Austria/Hungary. So, in her girlhood days she didn't work in the mills. She came from a peasant family and she came from a family

that believed that boys needed an education and girls didn't. Girls had to know how to cook and clean house and so on, but they didn't have to know how to read and write. My mother was illiterate. She never went to school and I feel very proud that I taught her how to read and write when I was 14 at home what I knew of teaching.

I. Tell me, Anne, when you were in the South in the 30s – and I know that you were called to Lawrence in 1931, by that time were you an experienced organizer? Or, in the 30s in the South were you just starting to learn?

N. Starting to learn.

I. Starting to learn. Okay. Because it interested me that Edith Berkman was here at the Strike of 1931 for the early strike in February. And, then, who called you? How did it all happen? That is what I'd really like to know.

N. Well I was a member of the National Textile Workers Union from the time I started work. I couldn't have been an organizer without some experience. So, when I was 14 and 15 and 16, I just worked at my job and was a member of the union. But, the majority of the workers said you couldn't talk about being in it in the mills. There was no law saying we had a right to talk about it, join it, be active in it.

I. Was it belonging to this union that got you fired a couple of times in Bethlehem? Was that when you first got fired?

N. Well, yes, those mills in Bethlehem – they weren't interested in the workers joining any union. But, they weren't bothered with the AFL at the time because the AFL followed a policy from its inception of organizing craft locals. All the weavers of all the mills would be part of one union. The spinners would be part of another union. The same union, nationally, but another local I would say. Workers at that time were dissatisfied with that kind of organization because they couldn't see how a union of all weavers in a city like Lawrence (or somewhere else) could represent the workers of one mill that was out on strike – or wanted to, and they didn't want to. And they were not organized in such a way as to being able to help the workers of one mill who were out on strike. So, our union was formed because we didn't agree with the AFL leadership on craft unions. They said once the big industries developed, where say 500 workers worked for one employer, and they were weavers and spinners and carters. Only loom fixers were organized. The loom fixers were the most skilled jobs. Well, they were machinists. If you could become a loom fixer, find out what was wrong with the loom and what would have to be done to make it function. You had to know, as a machinist, what made the looms go round and so forth.

I. Clear this up for me – it was going to be my last question. I have it way down at the bottom of my list, but you've mentioned that you belonged to the National Textile Workers Union. In these various – Dr. Irvin's interview and in some of

the newspaper articles that I've read, other unions that are mentioned in relation to this 1931 strike were American Textile Workers Union, United Textile Workers Union and International Textile Workers Union. I was going to ask you if they all existed or if some of these may have been typos that someone . . . But I did want to discern which were the important unions. Did they all exist?

N. I really don't know. Because if they did exist, they were some small unions that didn't play any major role in the big strike.

I. All right, then I'm going to underline National Textile Workers. That's the union that you belonged to.

N. Well, that was our union and that's what . . . it was our union that called the strike.

I. Then, you were in the South. Edith Berkman had been . . .

N. She was assigned to Lawrence. She was a Lawrence organizer.

I. Then, how were you notified that she was out and you were in?

N. We were acquainted with what existed in what states and where the textile . . . well, we knew where the textile workers were. The South was very important because their major industry was textile. And, we knew that if we didn't organize the South they always threatened us with, "Well, the South works for lower wages and if you're not satisfied, we can move our mills to the South." An exodus of moving the mills from the North to the South did take place in the late 20s, beginning of the 30s. There used to be ads in the paper. In your research, if you were to check on the newspapers in cities like Lawrence, New Bedford, Fall River, Lowell, etc. – these are textile cities, major industry. And shoe industry, like Haverhill had both shoe and textile. Lawrence had some shoe plants, too, but those are the two major industries in New England. Haverhill was known as a shoe town, although I'm sure there's maybe one or two textile mills there too.

I. It's interesting though that you were organizing in the South, but eventually the mills in this area left and went south, apparently because the wages were less.

N. Because there was no organization until we came. I mean, there were very few people organized.

I. I'm trying to get this in my head in relation to you being there in the thirties, but that was in the fifties.

N. Our union starting organizing in some of the other major industries, like mining. After all, the United Mine Workers, which was the AFL, had been in existence for some time. But, textile was considered one of the unorganized industries. Maybe 5% of the industry was organized even in the North.

I. Okay. To get this right into Lawrence, when you came to Lawrence in 1931, how many people had come with you? You see, I'm trying to get a picture that we have so much about the worker. I wanted to get a good picture of the organizer because these were all the factions that made up a strike. And, when you were notified that you were needed in – we'll use Lawrence in 1931 – you didn't come alone, did you?

N. Well, nobody came with me. We had people here. Edith Berkman was a member of our union and she was assigned to work in the Lawrence/Lowell area. And, we had another organizer in the New Bedford/Fall River area. And then we had an organizer in – well, who took care of Taunton, for instance? Well, we had an organizer there.

I. And organizer would be someone who lived in that city or town?

N. Not necessarily. If there was, they preferred a textile worker. I was preferred in many areas because I was a textile worker. And, when I talked about looms and when I talked about conditions of work and what were some of the unreasonable things they wanted weavers to do . . . Actually, we used to always say when we were making most of the money was when we had to work the least. Because when the looms were running, all we did was to patrol them and look to see if everything was in order. The looms, at that time already, were supposed to be mechanical so that if any of the threads broke – you didn't refer to them as threads anyway – whenever they broke, they would be tangling up (if you know anything about knitting sweaters, for instance, or knitting shawls, which is a very simple thing. You do the same thing over and over again until you make your whole shawl.) You would watch to see that none of the threads broke because as soon as they broke, they would create an imperfection because they would get tangled with other threads and pretty soon it would be from a small tangle into a larger and larger area. And, you couldn't correct it unless you stopped the machine and you pulled out the threads that they went across and took out ripped, is what we referred to, your ripped thing that was tangled up. And only when you came to the good material did you stop and you started all over again. And, that's when you had to know how to join the good part of the material so that when you started working the machine, it would not leave a bad section or a flaw. Because that would mean that that piece of material would have a flaw in it and would have to be sold as a second. And, then you don't get paid as much.

I. I'm very conscious here of the fact that your driver is going to be back in half an hour.

SIDE 2 of TAPE 1

I. This is side 2 of the oral history tape for Immigrant City Archives with Anne Burlak Timpson. One of the questions that I wanted you to qualify for me is that actually the two strikes of 1931 were not won by . . .

N. Well, it was in the same mills but because they didn't do what they wanted in the February strike, that they came out on strike. And, that was also because not all the mills were involved in the February strike. I was not involved in the February strike. We had an organizer. You see, I came to replace Edith Berkman.

I. The February strike, as I understood it, had to do with a method of work rather than wages. It was called a stretchout. Anyhow in the second strike, the owners wanted to make a 10% reduction in pay and then they offered a 5% reduction. And then, believe it or not in everything I've read, I haven't been able to figure out when the workers finally went back to work, do you know if they accepted the 10% or the 5% reduction?

N. They were given the 5%. You see, that was one of the reasons why we formed a new union because the AFL had a policy of going in to the management and negotiating with them. And, they would make compromises without consulting the workers. And, the workers were very dissatisfied. And, that's why the second strike actually took place because they got a cut in wages. They said that they could not correct the situation between the South and the North. They were paying less wages in the South because they were competing and the South was always used as a reason why the New England Mills couldn't keep the difference. Now what they didn't tell workers was that very often the same people were on the Board of Directors in the northern mills as were on the Board of Directors in the South.

I. Did the depression have anything to do with any of these decisions because we're right in the middle of the depression years now?

N. Yes. Well, the North used to say, "We can't compete with the South". And, at the same time, if you did some research you would find that many of the mills in the South, which were owned by Congressmen and Governors (in other words, the politicians), it was very easy to establish among the workers that they were not going to get fair conditions of work by dealing with the employers here because they say they cannot compete with the South. But, actually the employers in the South were the same people that were the employers in the North.

I. These are just things I want to clarify. As I have understood it, the Stevens Mill in the South in recent years was not a union mill. But, in the strike of 1931, the Stevens Mill in No. Andover struck, as I understand it, at least in sympathy with the other strikers. It refers to in the newspaper article that the workers left and . . . it was also the Osgood Mill in No. Andover. Do you know whether or not the Stevens Mill in 1931 was unionized – was organized – or was not?

N. I don't think it was.

I. I don't think so either. Okay. That helps me there. Then their workers probably did it in sympathy.

N. I can't tell you at this moment whether they were out on strike.

I. And the other thing that I absolutely have to have cleared up is . . . I had always understood that Edith Berkmann was the "Red Flame". This is one of those things. I wanted to know which one.

N. Well, the term was first used against Edith. I was not in the picture at all. I was in Rhode Island at the time. It was our union and she was our organizer, but it was used against her for only a matter of a couple of months. And, then one of the headlines in the Lawrence paper, in fact, said, "One red flame jailed. Another rises in her place."

I. You saw that article? That was one of the . . . that's when I came into the story. And then, of course, ever since then, Edith was not referred to. She was in jail. That's another thing that I need to have cleared up. It said that she was told she would be deported to Poland. This had to do with the Immigration people. We won't get into the whole story, though.

I. I saw that article.

N. I saw that article. That was in the hands of the authorities.

I. And, then you came in. But then I've read other accounts that say that she also showed up in the second 1931 strike. So, did she or didn't she? Was she or wasn't she deported to Poland? Or, did she take part in the second 1931 strike – the one in the fall?

N. She was not deported. But, there is such a law as voluntary departure.

I. No. I don't think she went either.

N. No. She was not because we put on a big campaign to keep her from being deported and she's Portuguese. She was going to be deported to Portugal. And Portugal was a fascist country at that time. And, we fought against her being deported to Portugal because it would have meant that she would be put in a concentration camp or perhaps executed.

I. Was she a Communist?

N. Yes and so am I.

I. Yes and you are. I think I understood that.

N. That would be another thing I would be curious about in terms of . . . it appeared that there was always friction in Lawrence between Communist organizers when they came. It didn't seem to exist at other times.

I. The AFL leadership were as vicious in attacking our organizers both verbally and sometimes physically as the employers. The AFL would issue circulars in which they would say, "Join an American Union. These are foreigners." Edith was one of the people that they were referring to because she came from Poland. In New Bedford, they didn't have that problem because most of the organizers were native state. In our union, they preferred to have people who worked at the mill and who were known by the workers and so forth and so on. Whereas, the AFL as well as the employers would refer to us as being foreigners even though people like myself were American born and came out of the industry. Many of the organizers were from the industries and the union approached them to become organizers.

I. I was interested in the Governor here at the time was Governor Ely. Apparently he took a very firm hand in the development and apparent resolution of the Strike of 1931. I think it was assumed that he probably was working mostly with management and civic leaders. On the other hand, I read an excerpt from a speech he gave after the Strike of 1931 was over and I found it interesting because in it he becomes an advocate for the worker. Apparently through his experience here he felt the worker was not well enough understood and represented. I had to think about that because the worker was represented but might he had felt that the representation was not what he found desirable or what he approved of? And, what I'm getting at is because of the anti-Communist feeling that prevailed in some areas at some times, was that an advantage or a disadvantage to you as an organizer because obviously you wanted to help the worker? But, if you were a democrat or a republican, would it have been less difficult for you?

N. Well, the republicans and democrats tried to avoid being involved in battles because as far as the employers were concerned, they didn't want any union. But, they took advantage in this schism between the unions because one of the things they wanted was unity among the workers. But unity for their advantage. And, we constantly tried to educate the workers that the employers are going to use any tactic that will break the unions. There used to be antagonism between the French Canadians and the Italians. The Italians were referred to as the more aggressive people. The French Canadians were criticized by other workers because they said they were the ones that cooperated with the employers. But, all of these things – men against women, older workers against young workers, Native Americans – well, Native Americans are only the Indians, so . . . you know, the English speaking. A lot of the textile workers either originally came here from England or Wales or Scotland because that's where the textile mills were. There were some textile mills in Poland and some of the other industrial cities. So, you had the English-speaking workers that were favored. And, they used to use that in the propaganda of the newspapers you know against the workers from the other European countries that were Socialists. They used interchangeable Russian or

Ukrainian or all the Slavs, for instance. In New Bedford, most of the workers were Portuguese. In Lawrence, most of them were Italians.

I. Did you know Pauline Newman by any chance?

N. No, I don't think so. Maybe she came in later in the sixties or something.

I. I think that would be correct. She was among that group of women organizers. She's one I particularly admire. Did Elizabeth Gurley Flynn take part in the 1931 strike?

N. She did not. She may have come here to speak once or twice, but she didn't come in that strike. She was involved in the 1912 strike and there was another strike in 1919. She may have come here to speak at that time, too.

I. Yes, I think that was the one right after World War I when there was a reduction of orders and that strike took place. Once again, I'm conscious of this driver of yours who is coming back. I want to give Hartley a chance to get in here with a question or two. And, I also want to ask you if there's anything in particular that I haven't mentioned because this is not comprehensive to be sure. I'm trying to get clarification if there is something you would like to talk about. But, we'll give Hartley his chance first. (Hartley speaks next)

I. Well, I think I'll pick up from there. Did you know Elizabeth Gurley Flynn or any of the other people involved in the 1912 strike personally?

N. Well, I didn't meet Elizabeth Gurley Flynn until the thirties. She became a member of the Communist Party in 1935 or 1936.

I. She was president, wasn't she, for awhile I think?

N. After she became, she was an internationally known labor leader.

I. Can I interject here? What attracted you to Communism? I think, in this country, it is not the major party but certainly is one. But, what would have attracted you to it?

N. Well, I was familiar with what the AFL was doing. That was the only organization among . . . well many of the craft unions were already members of the AFL. There were the carpenters and the electricians and the various other crafts that were organized. Auto workers was one of the other organized. That's when the big CIO drive started. These big industries began to be organized. And, incidentally, if you read the story of the Auto Workers Union . . . a few months ago there was a program on public television about the auto workers for a half hour and then a half hour about the textile workers. And, the auto workers was a very militant strike with a lot of action in it.

I. Was that Flynt in 1937 – a sit-down strike?

N. Yes. And they developed the idea of the sit-down strike because the picket lines were being attacked by the authorities (by the police) and sometimes the troops were called in and so forth. The textile workers sort of learned from the others. But, it was when the CIO drive started in 1936 or 1935. Well, it started within the AFL. There were committees and industrial organizations . . . with first committees within the AFL. And then when they were being persecuted, _____ Lewis, who became the head of the CIO and other labor leaders became organizers for the CIO. And the CIO adopted policies, which the communists, as such, were very much in favor of because they agreed on militant picket lines, mass picket lines. The old method of picketing by the AFL wouldn't do. There were a couple of guys with sandwich boards, carpenters in this building on strike. And, that would be the picket line – those two people walking and being replaced every so often. Whereas, when the CIO was organized, they adopted our proposal of mass picket lines. This way, if workers would cross a picket line of two guys with sandwich signs, they would not be so anxious to go through a picket line. Not because they were faced with danger, but they themselves felt that they were doing something that was very unpopular among the strikers – not only those strikers but other people. So they were attacked. Although when you come to the textile industry especially in the South, some of the strikes conducted by the AFL were as viciously attacked as the National Textile Workers Union. The Gastonia Strike, which was in 1929, was the first strike that was organized by the National Textile Workers Union. And then it just picked up and everywhere where there were textile mills, workers said, "Well, that's what we need. We need to spread the strike". And they would watch from mill to mill. The AFL was not anxious to have it spread.

I. Excuse me, where is Gastonia?

N. In North Carolina. And, Foster, when he . . . he was head of the National Textile Workers Union – William C. Foster. And, he was for mass action in getting the mills squared. And, he wrote a book on his organizing. And, he said in one of the chapters that they should have spread the strike – that the National Textile Workers Union concentrated on that particular strike. That those were the workers that came out on strike. The National Textile Workers Union tried to get a lot of support – solidarity action from other unions. But, they concentrated on that instead of just saying, "Well, let's spread the strike". And, he felt that it was a mistake and that they should have spread the strike and then dealt with a nationwide strike where at least they wouldn't have one single strike that would be attacked with the viciousness of which it was.

I. Apparently, you women were successful in what you did. I know there were men organizers, but . . .

N. Well, the majority of the workers were women.

I. Yes and you were experienced women. And, I was fascinated by one thing I read. I read in a newspaper clipping – this was the Patterson, New Jersey strike. The strikes were addressed by Fred Morgancoff. And then it says, “New girl leader – Sophie Melvin – comes on the scene”. I don’t know if you’re familiar with that . . .

N. I know her very well.

I. Is that so?

N. She took part in the Gastonia Strike. She was one of the northern organizers that was sent in. And in the South, you were not just called Yankees, which had a certain connotation, we were called “Damn Yankees”. Always called “Damn Yankees”. And, that was also to keep the North divided from the South. The thread that runs all through is that the mill owners tried to prevent unity among the workers. There were means they needed to use. And those that wanted organization, like I said we certainly must work together. And, even though there are AFL locals or the Textile Workers Union, we must work with them as our compatriarchs, or whatever you want to call them.

I. Okay, I want to add one more thing here. After it mentioned the new girl leader, Sophie Melvin, it said, “And John J. Ballum, who took part in the Strike of 1912” and I am not familiar with his name in terms of the Strike of 1912. I wanted to ask you if you are.

N. He was one of the older men. He had white hair when I first met him.

I. But, he was here in 1912?

N. Obviously. I was not.

I. Oh, that’s right. Sorry.

N. I was not aware of his being here in 1912, but yes, I think he was. He was referred to. The reason I’m holding this book is that in the 1912 strike, one of the big things that became a national scandal was that children were working in these mills, some of them as young as 10 years old and 12. And the law saying that they couldn’t get jobs in textile mills before they were 14. Later it was changed to 16. But, they just didn’t enforce that law. You read about the people that took part in the 1912 strike and there are even some videos now. I don’t know how they got the videos. They didn’t have the video equipment in 1912. However, whatever the technique is, they are able to show them and you see barefoot children. There’s a very famous picture - you might have it in the exhibit – where a girl child is tending looms and is looking out the window watching grown men play golf.

I. Yes I’ve seen that picture.

N. She says she's working in the mills but she's looking out her window and she sees the men playing – I don't know if it was golf or some other game having fun.

I. I'm not going to add to the child labor but I have done oral history interviews where someone will tell me about a grandfather or a father. People would pretend that a child was older than a child was because they needed the money surviving that they would allow them to go and work in the mill by just signing a paper that . . .

N. When I went to work, it was no longer 14 years. It was 16 years and I was 14 when I started. But, I was a healthy, young woman. And, I said when I went for a job that I was 16. So, I lied about my age but that was because dad was working two days a week and the family just needed that extra money.

I. Just go on with what you want.

N. I was trying to call your attention and I'm sure your library must have this book. There's a section called, "Suffer Little Children". They have a whole chapter on how these children are foreign-born workers – Greeks, Turks, Armenians, Russians, Italians, French, German, Irish. And, when the American Woolen Company built its mills in Lawrence, they sent out agents into Europe into the companies that have textile industries. And, they were instructed not to offer jobs to people of one nationality but to try to get them from different nationalities because they were counting on the foreign born workers, which they brought in here. They wanted them not to be able to get together to organize. And, if they came from different countries, they spoke different languages. What they didn't take into consideration – well maybe they didn't know where the miller was may not have known. I don't know but it seems to me impossible that they shouldn't have known. The term socialist was interchangeably used with communist socialist. And the word socialist is not a dirty word in Europe. It's accepted as one of the political trends. So, that by saying to the workers coming here from either Poland or Germany or Austria or whatever country, or Italy, when you say somebody is a socialist, that will raise eyebrows and say, "Well we can't take them". But, in the United States, which started out much later and which had . . . well, it was the land of opportunity, it was the land that was different from the European countries and so forth and so on. And, we didn't need socialism to tell the European workers that the streets . . . they used to say are lined with gold. And, the miners used to get black lung because of the coal dust. But in textile, we used to often talk about so many workers getting consumption or TB and then only later did they figure out that the illnesses that developed in textile were very similar to the miner's illness, except theirs came from the coal dust and here it came from lint from the cotton factories. In the cotton factories, the lint was so severe and so much of it that sometimes you would hold your hand out like this and you couldn't make out the shape of your hand because you couldn't see through the lint. And that's what the workers would breathe into their lungs and they would be all . . . they called it TB, they called it consumption, they called it

tuberculosis until they developed what it was caused by. So, anyway, in this book they talk about some of that stuff and about the small children, which were referred to as . . . well there's a little chapter on it. And, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn was one of the people who . . .

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE 2**TAPE 2 SIDE 1**

- I. Today is March 17th, Sunday, 1996.
- N. When Elizabeth tried to organize to take the children – when she had read that in Europe in some of the countries, there were union members from the cities would come into small towns. And when there was a strike there, they would try to arrange for the children of the strikers to be taken to other cities, big cities, where they would be taking in each child or a couple of children if it was a sister and brother. They would be taken in by union members in that city and they would take care of them and they would buy they clothes. They described how the children had no underwear, for instance. Many of the children had no underwear, how they had ragged clothes, how they had shoes that were not useful in wet weather or in the winter. And these people who are taking care of them would buy them new clothes and then they would arrange to take pictures of the children with their new clothes and they wouldn't look like the same children because they had new shoes on and they had new clothing on and warm clothing. They said many of those children, they worked in woolen mills but they never had a single piece of clothing that was made of wool.
- I. Now was this done also in other cities?
- N. Well, this thing of taking children? I think that it did happen but I personally am not familiar with it. But they describe a scene in Lowell and then later in Lawrence where the children were brought by Elizabeth and other union organizers to the railroad and some of them getting through. Then they decided to crack down on them and they had the police and the military come to the station and they describe a scene where the police attacked the children and the mothers with clubs and arrested a whole number of them and so forth. How brutally they attacked these young children, some of them 10 and 12 years old.
- I. Yes. Some of this – I have to say I've done so much reading on this subject, that it was supposed to happen and then there was no question that the women and children were stopped from leaving the city by ordinance at one time. But, the brutality part of it, that is a very pro and con subject.
- N. Well there is much written up and in fact there were pictures taken. And there was a congressional hearing which had some of these children come to Washington, D.C. and report what happened to them and how many of the children were beaten and so forth.

I. (Hartley Pleshaw speaking) I don't mean to interrupt here, but I think I should make this point. I once interviewed one of the children who was evacuated from Lawrence in 1912. I have that interview on film. I don't think he witnessed this confrontational though I've certainly read about this confrontation and heard of it. But, he told me what it was like to be in Lawrence in those days. He remembered _____ I don't know if he saw Elizabeth Gurley Flynn but he remembered big Bill Haywood. And, so, I can testify that I did speak to someone who went through this as far as being evacuated from the city.

I. Yes, we have on tape some of the children and grandchildren of those people. It's really a mark of distinction. They like to talk about it on tape.

N. Well if you read nothing else, there is a chapter on the Lawrence Textile Strike. This is the Strike of 1912, January 11, 1912, and the thing with the children and how that scene – it actually happened in Lowell rather than Lawrence. That is where there was all this brutality. And then it came up in the congressional committees and prominent people, presidents, congressmen and senators and wives of presidents testified at that hearing about this brutality and so forth.

I. I guess Mrs. Taft took a personal interest in this and I interviewed someone once who mentioned President Taft used to visit at the Cunard Estate in North Andover. So the Tafts had a convergence here of different moments.

N. So I would recommend that you get an opportunity to . . . even if you don't read the whole book, to read the one chapter that is called "The Lawrence Textile Strike" and they're referring to the 1912 strike. And then, for instance, here is a group – whether this is a group that was brutalized, I don't know. But there's a dozen children with Elizabeth standing on the side of that picture.

I. You have been very generous with your time and it's truly appreciated.

N. Now maybe the two of you could get together and come down to Gloucester.

I. I'd like that. Now, do you live in Gloucester?

N. I live in Gloucester.

I. Side 1 of Tape 2 of the Anne Burlak Timpson tape done for Immigrant City Archives ends here.

END OF INTERVIEW